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# On Teachers' Professionalism When Colleagues Express Racism – Challenges and Choices

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to shed light on teachers' actions to counter racism expressed by their colleagues. Based on qualitative interviews with teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools, the article presents a narrative analysis of three teachers. The article highlights the complexity of what it means to be a colleague in anti-racist work and argues that this brings different risks and possibilities for White teachers and for teachers of colour. By relating the narratives to research on racism and teacher professionalism, the article contributes to a better understanding of the prevalence and character of racism expressed by colleagues, and points at the need for further research.

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## KEYWORDS

Teachers; professionalism; racism; anti-racism; colleagues; narrative

## Introduction

In Sweden, educational policies clearly state that teachers have a responsibility to counteract every form of racist expression in schools (SFS, 2008:567; SFS, 2010:800). However, when it comes to racism expressed by colleagues, the boundaries of this responsibility are somewhat blurred, and countering such racism can be sensitive and risky. With regard to racism, it could be argued that, since the Second World War, Sweden has often held the position of “a land of tolerance” (Jämte, 2013). Racism has thus been positioned outside the Swedish context – as something existing in other historical times and in other places. This self-image has, however, been challenged since the 1990s, as ideological racism has become increasingly evident. Since then there has been a struggle in Sweden over how racism is to be understood, leading to greater awareness of structural racism. This has come hand in hand with increased migration to Sweden in recent decades, and school statistics show that over 30 per cent of students in upper secondary schools are minority Swedes.<sup>1</sup>

While under-researched in many countries, racism is a divisive topic, evidently experienced by substantial sections of the population, including in schools and by teachers. Typically invisible to those who are not subject to it, it is important to document the challenges that many teachers encounter and handle on a daily basis in their schools. This puts pressure on teachers to take anti-racist actions, in order to provide equal opportunities for all children to develop and learn (Lgy 11; SFS, 2010:800). Earlier research has shown that teachers can develop different approaches to countering racism in education (cf. Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004; DiAngelo, 2012). But research on how they act and reflect upon racism expressed by their colleagues is rare. We therefore make this issue the focus of attention here.

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The aim of this article is to shed light on teachers' actions to counter racism expressed by their colleagues, by focusing on the professional challenges and choices such actions entail. The study draws on qualitative interviews about racism and anti-racism in education, conducted with teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools. Using narrative analysis, we focus on three teachers and their experiences of responding to colleagues who express racism. By turning the lens on teachers (rather than students), and by bringing together research on racism and anti-racism with research on teacher professionalism, the article contributes new knowledge concerning the plurality of teachers' actions when colleagues express racism and points to the need for further reflection on what it means to be a colleague in anti-racist work.

### ***Racism and Anti-racism among Teachers***

Racism is understood in this article as a broad concept, ranging from structural to interpersonal and internalized racism (Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Berman & Paradies, 2010). On a structural level, racism occurs in education in the form of, for example, discrimination, school segregation, and monocultural teaching. Racism also occurs on an interpersonal level in exclusion, hate speech, and violence between people. On an internalized level, individuals who are exposed to racism can develop negative feelings about themselves and their belonging. Our main focus is on racism and anti-racism among teachers. In Sweden, it could be argued that the discussion about teachers' professionalism seems to be colour-blind. Teachers' backgrounds are addressed in terms of gender and class, but more rarely in terms of race and culture. A few exceptions are Arneback and Englund's (2020) work on how teachers' different backgrounds influence their response to expressions of racism among students, and Bayati's (2014) work on how the racialization of teacher education in Sweden is giving student teachers of colour a subordinate position. The latter, for example, shows how racialized segregation in society is reconstructed in education when students organize themselves in group work or in how they place themselves in classrooms.

In the US and the UK, the importance of teachers' race and culture has been addressed in several ways. One aspect of importance for this article is the structural dimension of racism (cf. Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998) that occurs in school practice, both in classrooms and, as we will see in our data, in staffrooms. From a structural perspective, racism is understood as a system of power – where there is an unequal distribution of power, resources, privilege and life chances based on race and culture. It can thus manifest itself in several ways in schools, in the way staff and students relate to, talk to and act towards each other in everyday practice (Pollack, 2017). This is further complicated by the occurrence of colour blindness, where skin colour is *said* to make no difference but in *practice* forms a basis for unjust treatment in education (Bonilla-Silva, 2011).

Taken together, this means that many teachers have experiences of racism that they need to understand and confront. Earlier research has for example shown how “codes of White culture”, “White privilege” and “White dominance” occur in the life and work of teachers (DiAngelo, 2012; Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2005). This privilege often makes White teachers unaware or unwilling to change, but there are also those who recognize the problem and want to work for social transformation. When it comes to White teachers who are more aware of racism, Johnson (2002) has found that they often have experiences of being perceived as “outsiders” owing to class or sexual orientation, have friends from different backgrounds, and have a strong belief in social justice.

Matias and Allen (2013) argue that White teachers need to work with their feelings, to strive for humanizing love. Instead of focusing on feelings of fear, shame or grief, when racism occurs in education teachers need to try to focus on the possibility of positive feelings of love and humanity that could accompany their actions. This could also provide an opening for teachers to “disinvest in whiteness such that the discomfort in talking about race becomes less violent” (p. 303) and to contribute to transforming relations of oppression in education.

Earlier research has also shown how teachers of colour struggle in several ways with structural racism in education. For example, it has been found that they are exposed to racism in their

workplace, in the form of racial microaggressions (Kohli, 2018; Pearce, 2019), and that Black teachers “spent a lot of their time and energy responding to the racism their White colleagues exhibited” (Duncan, 2019, p. 198). Kohli (2018) also points out that the limited presence of teachers of colour in a school “creates a climate of intense isolation and racialization” (p. 322) among these teachers, leading to professional, personal and ethical risks that White teachers are able to avoid.

Kevin Kumashiro’s (2009) writing on anti-oppressive education highlights processes of troubling learning, research and teacher professionalism to enable change. Working against oppression in education is a constant struggle which cannot be predetermined or carried to completion, but rather is something that is always “in becoming” (p. 15). In relation to the term professionalism, Kumashiro highlights the need to work against a fixation on what it means to be a teacher, since there is a need to be open to different ways of acting as a teacher in order to enable change. In this text, we will put this aspect centre stage by exploring and discussing teachers’ anti-racist actions in terms of professionalism.

### ***Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Collaboration***

In a broader sense, the concept of teacher professionalism captures an interest in pedagogical qualities in teachers’ practice (Hoyle, 1980; Socket, 1993). To conceptualize the complexity teachers are situated in, Solbrekke and Englund (2011) make an analytical distinction between professional responsibility and professional accountability. While the first is based in a moral rationale, the latter reflects an economic and legal rationale. Professional responsibility thus covers qualities such as values, feelings and the constant struggle of becoming, as referred to above. Professional accountability points to different contextual issues, such as policies and regulations. Our assumption is that issues of racism and anti-racism can arise in relation to both professional responsibility and professional accountability.

The relationship and possible tensions between professional responsibility and professional accountability are reflected in research from the last two decades. It has been demonstrated that value dimensions of teachers’ professionalism have been challenged as a result of increasingly prominent policies of accountability (Ball et al., 2012; Bergh, 2015a; Bergh, 2015b). An argument put forward is that it is necessary to create conditions locally for critical discussions that go beyond simple solutions (Helstad & Mausethagen, 2019). This conclusion is supported by earlier research, with the message that there is great potential in collegial collaboration and that “collaboration that is deep enough and touches the underlying beliefs of teachers is needed for actual school change” (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 27; see also Kelchtermans, 2005).

Earlier research also shows how different issues in the local school context, such as school culture and interaction between students and teachers or between colleagues, can both enable and hinder teachers’ professionalism (De Jong et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is research that problematizes an understanding of collegiality as either good or bad, with teachers either working smoothly together *or* getting into micro-political conflicts that conserve their working methods. By bridging research on teacher collegiality and teachers’ emotions, Löfgren and Karlsson (2016) argue the need for more detailed analysis of individual teachers’ stories that can offer a more complex understanding of collegiality.

In relation to the aim of this article, research into teachers’ anti-racist work and teacher professionalism together provides important insights which enable a dynamic analysis of the challenges and choices that arise for teachers in their actions to counter racism. While research on teacher professionalism offers a broad conceptual understanding of that concept, research on racism and anti-racism contributes a specific depth that points to the everyday struggle against racism.

### **Data and Methods**

This article is based on qualitative interviews with three teachers working in upper secondary schools. By using qualitative interviews as a method, we shed light on the professional challenges

and choices that teachers face when countering racism expressed by their colleagues. The qualitative interviews allowed us to in-depth explore teachers' experiences of countering racism expressed by their colleagues, as well as the challenges and choices such actions entail. The teachers were interviewed as part of a research project about teachers' anti-racist actions in education. Within the project, we interviewed a total of 27 teachers. The interviews were carried out by four project members. The interviews with these teachers constituted the data from which the three teachers chosen for this article were selected.

When asking teachers to participate in the study, our guiding principle was to seek to include a plurality of experiences of counteracting racism in schools. The participating teachers work in schools that are set in different geographical and social contexts. The interviews with them lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. They were carried out following a semi-structured interview guide (see Martin, 2017), covering four main themes: (1) definitions of racism, (2) personal experiences of racism, (3) expressions of racism in the teachers' schools, and (4) how the teachers counteracted racism. To cover these themes in depth, 25 of the 27 teachers were interviewed on two separate occasions. The transcribed interviews were then coded with inspiration from qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), using the Nvivo software. Following Schreier, the transcriptions were coded using main codes; in this case, three main codes were used: (i) teachers' conceptions of racism; (ii) teachers' experiences of racism; and (iii) teachers' anti-racist actions. Each of these main codes was then divided into several subcodes. In all, the 27 interviews generated 69 subcodes.

One of these subcodes covered situations in which racism was expressed by the teachers' colleagues. Six of the 27 interviewed teachers talked about their colleagues' expressions of racism. Even if six teachers talked about their colleagues' racist expressions, we found that by choosing three of them, we were able to conduct an in-depth analysis of the responses but still shed light on the issue from various points of views. Thus, with our interest in and aim of analysing the issue in depth, we chose to conduct a narrative analysis of three teachers, who we have named *Fatima*, *Tove* and *Hannah*. These three teachers should not be understood as representing the group of six teachers who all talked about their colleagues' racist expressions, but as three teachers who provided us with comprehensive empirical data that highlights the complexity and different meanings of teacher professionalism in relation to racism. We also chose them because they experience their colleagues' racism from different positions, both within the school and in society. The interviews with Fatima and Tove were conducted by author 1 and author 2, while the interview with Hannah was conducted by another member of our research project.

Engaging in research on highly sensitive issues, such as racism, requires careful ethical consideration. In this research project and in our interviews with the teachers, we have followed the ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017). A key issue that we encountered was the question of how to protect the teachers. When writing about the teachers' schools, we have left out details that enable them to be identified. As this study deals with the issue of racism, our own position and our own racial make-up are dimensions that cannot be omitted. All the researchers in the team are White, which has implications for the collection of data. We are aware that racial bonding (Fasching-Varner, 2013) probably shaped both the content and the structure of the interviews. Having said that, we also want to underscore our impression that all of the teachers interviewed, and certainly Fatima, Tove and Hannah, related to us with trust and confidence during the interviews.

### **Narrative Analysis**

To perform an in-depth analysis, we drew inspiration from a narrative methodology that enabled us to highlight the uniqueness of these teachers' experiences. Focusing on the individual cases made possible an analysis that places agency in the foreground (Kohler Riessman, 2008). As Gill Adams (2017) puts it, using a narrative approach instead of just codes is about "preserving human agency, coherence, sequential, and structural features of the story" (Adams, 2017, p. 164).

The analytical procedure consisted of two separate steps, the first being to construct the narratives and the second to analyse them. In the first step we constructed narratives based on the interview transcripts, doing so in the light of our specific interest in the teachers' experiences of racism expressed by their colleagues. We carefully chose descriptions that the teachers provided during the interviews and arranged them into narratives. This means that we situated the teachers' descriptions of racism in relation to their personal and professional history. For instance, one of the teachers, Hannah, said during her interview that she has sworn to herself that she will always confront every expression of racism that she encounters in her school. In constructing Hannah's narrative, we saw this statement as a key to understanding her approach to racism. We constructed her narrative by weaving this statement together with descriptions of her background as an activist and with descriptions of why she became a teacher in the first place.

The second step was our analysis of the three different narratives. Here, we related the overall patterns in the narratives to previous research, in order to go beyond these three teachers and their experiences. This step was guided by two questions: (1) What challenges and choices for anti-racist education appear in the teachers' narratives? (2) What can the narratives tell us about teacher professionalism? In answering the second question, we focused on three aspects of professionalism: professional responsibility, professional accountability and teacher collaboration.

## Results

This results section consists of three teacher narratives that shed light on teachers' actions when they encounter racism expressed by their colleagues. The narratives provide an in-depth perspective on the challenges and choices teachers face when colleagues express racism. The three teachers illustrate three different approaches and highlight how teachers encounter their colleagues' expressions of racism from different positions.

### *Fatima*

Fatima, a Black Muslim woman in her late twenties, is a teacher on a language introduction programme at an upper secondary school. The school that Fatima works in is situated in a small town and offers a wide range of programmes. Fatima describes it as a large school and a good one, but also one that is fragmented, which creates different types of challenges. One problem is that the language introduction programme that she works on is "a bit apart from the rest" and not included in the wider community of the school. "This also means that our students don't have the same conditions as other students." She describes how the teachers have different priorities and attitudes regarding students on the introduction programme compared with those on the general programmes. For example, it is more common to "cancel lessons" and to "view the students as problematic" if they are on the introduction programme.

Fatima was born in a medium-sized town in Sweden, and her parents were born in Somalia. She describes her early childhood as relatively good and her schooling as positive, although there was a lack of representation of otherness as she was growing up. "I did not have so many role models around me or people who looked like me, there was a great lack of representation. This affected my own self-image and how I perceived myself." But she also describes important people in her childhood. For example, as a student, Fatima had a teacher in social studies, "a good and strong woman", who inspired her a lot and was an important role model for her in her decision to become a teacher.

Fatima emphasizes that she has a structural understanding of racism, according to which everyday patterns of power are important to observe, but says that it has been a long journey to develop such an understanding. Since the age of eight, she has experienced both explicit and implicit racism. As a mother, Fatima also struggles with thoughts about how racism affects her children. It thus follows that she cannot step aside or choose whether or not she wants to address questions of racism,



since they are always there. She describes how hard it can be always to “be a representative of Somalis, of Muslims and of the veiled, of the dark-skinned and of Africans. It’s tiring. Sometimes you just want to take a break.” In her role as a teacher, racism has occurred both as explicit speech among students and colleagues, and more often as subtle “comments that people throw out, without reflecting on them”.

Fatima says that one of the most painful parts of her work is handling racism among her colleagues. She describes how colleagues express racism more often than students, probably because “the staffroom ... is a slightly more relaxed environment”. In the staffroom, teachers are more private and make more sweeping statements that cannot be articulated in other parts of the school (such as during staff meetings or in teaching). One example of problematic talk in the staffroom is “when a teacher starts talking about the students’ names and how difficult and strange the names are, and hard to spell”. Or when there is to be an after-work event on a hairstyle theme and a White male colleague says that he will “come with Afro hair”, and everyone thinks that he is such a funny guy. She describes how these kinds of things happen all the time, and how she tries to be “a person who reacts when I hear something that is not okay”. As a response she feels that “some people are more careful with their words” when she is around, but also that she avoids talking to some of her colleagues. But it is hard to always be the person who reacts, especially when you are already viewed as “the other” among the staff. Fatima admits that it takes a lot of energy to react, and that she often stands alone when she does so. She is therefore forced to “pick her battles” to be able to cope with her work.

Although the school has tried to address questions of racism in different ways, Fatima feels that there are few colleagues who really understand the problem and act. But a couple of colleagues do try to support her, and their support means a lot: “they may not have the same experience as me, but at least they understand some aspects”. As a person with experience of being subjected to racism, Fatima emphasizes that her greatest fear is not those who express racism, but rather the silence of the majority. “And I think that, with racism, the worst thing is probably not when it is happening, but the people around you and how they react. And whether they react, or are passive.” She strongly emphasizes that Swedish people with anti-racist views need to take action and that there “are too few who resist and speak out”. Even if she has a few colleagues on her side, her main experience is a lack of support from White people around her: “Afterwards they complain and say that they thought it was really awful, but they do not take a stand at the moment it is happening.” To handle the feeling of being alone, she seeks support on social media networks focusing on postcolonial perspectives and on separatist forums for women of colour with similar experiences to her own, “because I really need mutual recognition, encouragement and support”. To be able to continue her ongoing anti-racist struggle, she needs to find a space for solidarity.

## **Tove**

Tove, a White woman in her late thirties, teaches social studies and history in an upper secondary school. Situated in a central, yet rather small, town in a rural area, the school offers a broad range of programmes. A major factor in determining the character of the school is its geographical location far from bigger cities and its rather high continuity of inhabitants. At various times, the town has had problems with Nazi and racist movements. According to Tove, there is a dominant culture whereby many are afraid of the unknown, whether it is a matter of the wolves in the nearby forests or people from other parts of Sweden or other countries. Many students come from homes with what she terms “kitchen-table racism”, where norms are reproduced and taken for granted.

As part of her job, Tove has a special responsibility to lead the school’s work on value issues, a role that she finds extremely important as “we have huge problems in reaching a common understanding that there is a problem of racism in this school”. The challenge of reaching out and questioning dominant values not only applies to students, but also to many of her colleagues. With support from the new headteacher, she hopes for change: “Perhaps it is only now, after five



years beating my head against a brick wall trying to get this on the school's agenda that I feel we have gained an understanding that this is, yes, perhaps the core part of what education is."

Looking back at her own life, Tove explains that the combination of her own childhood, growing up in a very political home, and having had a fantastic teacher herself led her to choose a professional life as a teacher. Living in a politically challenging time where she sometimes meets "students with very extreme attitudes", it is hard not to emphasize that "we first of all have a mission to educate democratic citizens". Tove's engagement is based in a conviction about the role education can play in society. To achieve this, communication and acting in a way that builds relationships and includes other people are central. As a teacher, she does not want to force anyone to adopt "certain attitudes, but we can offer a smorgasbord where you can make your own choices". By scrutinizing taken-for-granted norms and unquestioned concepts, she hopes to equip her students with important knowledge and promote moral courage.

Although Tove has not witnessed racism in more physical forms, more subtle expressions of it are always present in her daily life, in the shape of both jokes and attitudes and more explicit forms of racial and sexist expression. As she sees it, racism is to be found in the norms, dominant structures and traditions that exclude people based on "who they are, where they come from, what religion they belong to etc." Those traditions are closely linked to fear, ignorance and a desire for a simple way to understand the world.

The professional dilemma that arises when encountering racism expressed by colleagues can be illustrated by a concrete example. One day, Tove came in to the staffroom for a cup of coffee, took her cup and sat down on a sofa where some of her colleagues were already sitting, engaged in a discussion. One of them, Curt, an older male colleague, told the others that during the weekend he had tried to sell his car by advertising it online. A man with an Arabic accent had called him and quite early on in the phone call the man had tried to haggle over the price. Curt's response, which he laughingly related to the others, had been to say: "You can take your offer and go home on your flying carpet to where you came from", and then Curt had hung up. After he had finished telling this story, some other colleagues had laughed, while others, including Tove, said nothing.

When Tove reflects on this situation, she explains that "this is quite a dominating colleague ... I think I was pretty shocked when he talked like this. And I felt ashamed because I didn't do anything about it, I really did. Of course I should have asked, just as I do with students: 'What's your thinking there, what do you mean?' or 'Why did you say that?' But I didn't". In addition to this specific situation, Tove is aware that Curt has made similar statements both before and afterwards, "and the sad thing is that the students have also noticed it". At a more general level, Tove thinks that "it is a delicate challenge criticizing colleagues, but that is really what I should do". However, despite the strong "I should do", Tove finds this particular colleague to be an extraordinary challenge. At the time of the staffroom incident Curt had a middle-managerial position, "but that's no excuse ... and that is what is especially embarrassing". In addition, Curt "as a person just laughs things off and quite quickly makes me feel insecure ... all my moral courage says that I should have talked to this person as soon as it happened, but for some reason I didn't". Later, Tove talked to other colleagues who were in the staffroom, and who just like her chose to keep quiet in conflict with their own beliefs, "but we ... Curt is a person you don't want to get into conflict with". For Tove this situation is painful and raises questions about her personal and professional responsibilities.

### **Hannah**

Hannah is a White woman in her thirties who teaches in a school with a predominance of White middle-class students. In describing her colleagues, Hannah gives an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, she says, it is the norm to be anti-racist and feminist, which she thinks is perhaps unique compared with other schools. On the other hand, there is a prevailing White norm at the school and racism is seen as a non-issue. If there is talk about racism, then it is as something abstract and not as

something that is experienced or felt by her colleagues. When Hannah compares this with another school she used to work at, she suggests that colleagues at her present school “don’t have a clue”.

Hannah has a background as an activist in different anti-racist movements, which has influenced her conception of racism. As an activist, she organized and participated in protests against racist parties and neo-Nazis. Those experiences had an impact: “one of the biggest crises I have had in my life was being a part of these things [protests against neo-Nazi movements] and seeing that the police, and those who are supposed to represent the state, are not even on your side.” In describing racism, Hannah points out that it should be understood as a structure that is intertwined with both capitalism and colonialism. As with patriarchy, she underscores, there are people who benefit from racist structures. Racism creates privileges for some people, and they become frightened when those privileges are threatened. So, from Hannah’s point of view, racism needs to be understood both on a structural level and as something that is intertwined with individual interests and privileges.

As a White person, she has no direct experience of herself being the subject of racism. But, as a woman, she “can feel the structures and how they affect those who are racialized”. In her activist work for refugees’ rights she has witnessed how people close to her are exposed to racism on an everyday basis. Even if, as a White woman, she does not have experience of racism as a *structure*, she has very palpable experience of confronting organized racists. Being active in protesting against neo-Nazi rallies meant that she took to the streets: “I stood there with my body, I still do”. Some of these protests were frightening experiences and, with the feeling of not being protected by the police, that fear stayed with her: “Since then [I] have been kind of afraid, scared of racists, and also I have not felt so protected when walking down the street.”

When Hannah describes racism among colleagues she says that the overall norm is to be a good anti-racist and a good feminist. However, she gets annoyed about how little her colleagues know and how unreflecting they are. Hannah says that one of her colleagues sometimes expresses racism more directly. She recalls a situation where that colleague used the N-word. In such situations, she underscores, it is good to have other colleagues who react and can gather around that one teacher and explain the problem to her. When they arise, Hannah always says something and brings the matter up for discussion: “I have sworn to myself that I will always stand up for the children, because when I don’t, as happened at the beginning of my career ... I felt so damn bad afterwards.”

To Hannah, her sense of responsibility for the students has a strong moral dimension, and not taking that responsibility is something that leaves her with a highly negative feeling. In order not to have to decide in each and every situation whether or not to act, *she* has sworn *to herself* that she will always stand up for the students. But questioning how her colleagues describe students does not pass without friction. When she questioned her colleague’s use of the N-word, the colleague responded in terms of “why shouldn’t I have the right to say that?” and “I don’t understand why that would be offensive”. Although she has support from other colleagues, Hannah has been criticized by some of her fellow teachers for being political. As the person who always talks back and always questions her colleagues if they express racism, Hannah has ended up with the role of a kill-joy among the teachers. “I have put myself in the position of being the school’s bitch, so I am already, kind of, like that person. ... I feel that I don’t have so much to lose any more by doing it.” What she has sworn to herself to do has come at such a cost that there is not much more to lose.

## Teachers’ Professionalism When Colleagues Express Racism

### *Challenges and Choices in Teachers’ Anti-racists Work*

As we read the narratives, a key challenge that emerges is that of cost, in the sense that it comes at a cost to be the person who wants to counteract expressions of racism in the staffroom. What Fatima, Tove, and Hannah have in common is that they all incur a high cost, but the cost is not the same for all three of them. By analysing the narratives, we can show how there’s a risk for both teachers of

colour and White teachers, but at the same time show how that risk differs and comes with different burdens.

Fatima, Tove, and Hannah understand racism at a structural level (cf. Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998): Fatima as “everyday patterns of power”, Tove in terms of “kitchen-table racism” rooted in (local) society, and Hannah as “racist structures” that are intertwined with both capitalism and colonialism. Even so, they also express different experiences and feelings when it comes to how they act when colleagues express racism.

As a person oppressed by racism, Fatima incurs the highest cost when counteracting expressions of racism. Being a Black woman in a school with a White male norm, she needs to both handle the pain inflicted by her White colleagues’ microaggressions (Kohli, 2018; Pearce, 2019), and choose how to respond to such expressions in “a climate of intense isolation and racialization” (cf. Duncan, 2019, p. 198). Even in situations where she decides not to act, she pays the cost of already being “the other”. For Fatima there is no “neutral” position in which she can decide “from the outside” whether or not racism is an issue she wants to engage with. What is clear is that she cannot afford to fight every battle. In one sense, it seems that Fatima does not have the privilege of putting herself in a situation where she has nothing left to lose. Instead, she finds support outside the school, interacting on social media with women of colour with similar experiences to her own. These forums give Fatima an opportunity to share in a solidarity that is hard to achieve in her local school, where colour blindness operates (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2011).

Tove’s and Hannah’s narratives illustrate the diversity that exists when it comes to the actions of White teachers. These narratives can contribute to a more complex and multifaceted image of White teachers’ privilege and risks (cf. Duncan, 2019). Compared with Johnson’s (2002) study, they both have features that are common among White teachers who are more aware of racism, such as a strong belief in social justice. But they also differ in the way they understand racism and their own responsibilities.

In the light of the work of Matias and Allen (2013), it is possible to highlight how both Tove and Hannah focus on their negative emotions. Moreover, we can see how Tove feels that she should stand up to racist “jokes” in the staffroom. Given her position in relation to her male colleagues, it can be difficult to act, and when she is unable to do so, it causes her shame and embarrassment. Tove does not relate to herself in terms of race, but rather in terms of being part of a racist society. She views herself as a force for good in a problematic structure, leading to feelings of shame when she does not live up to her own standards. But she does not reflect on the broader consequences of her silence. Hannah tells a similar story about what it feels like not to act when encountering expressions of racism. But in contrast to Tove, Hannah has decided, and promised herself, always to act, because when she did not do so, she felt “so damn bad afterwards”. To always act and stand up to racist expressions comes at a high cost for Hannah. In her experience, among her White colleagues her actions are viewed as a negative, bitchy, aspect of her personality.

### ***On Teacher Professionalism***

Fatima, Tove and Hannah are teachers who are highly committed to counteracting racism in their classrooms. However, when they encounter racism expressed by their colleagues, the situations are different – their colleagues are not their students. A specific challenge here is to translate the experience of being a teacher to students to that of being a teacher among teachers. When they encounter racism expressed by colleagues they are faced with difficult choices and sometimes painful situations that have a bearing on who they can be as teachers. In such situations they find themselves in a double bind: they will lose something by taking action, but equally they will lose something by remaining passive.

Going back to the research referred to earlier, we agree with Kumashiro’s (2009) argument about the need for constant struggle in anti-racist work. For us, this sends the message that

we should work with the concept of professionalism in a way that gives direction and meaning, but without making it too rigid. Likewise, we agree with Löfgren and Karlsson's (2016) argument that there is a risk in seeing collegiality as either good or bad. To these arguments we want to add that the conflicts and feelings expressed by the three teachers in our study not only point to challenges, but also open up for a discussion of possible choices to make with support from previous research on racism and teacher professionalism. Situated conflicts, which in this article include issues of power, highlight that teachers might even be part of the problem that they have a responsibility to solve. We argue that there is a need to pay closer attention to patterns of conflicts and power structures in more generally formulated theories on teacher professionalism.

Most of what is said in the three narratives touches on *professional responsibility* (cf. (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011)), which in this article, with its focus on racism and anti-racist actions, is given a certain direction and depth. The responsibility which Fatima, Tove and Hannah take on is not primarily one that emerges from their collegial relations; instead, they seem to take on a responsibility to act *as teachers*. Our analysis shows how this professional responsibility does not end in the classroom, but needs to be assumed in everyday practice, in the way teachers relate to, talk to and act towards each other – also in the staffroom (Pollack, 2017).

The second concept, *professional accountability*, has two sides to it. On the one hand, it reflects the developments of recent decades in educational policy, in which much of the complexity that is characteristic of human life and has the potential to be dealt with in education has been clearly challenged by demands for clarity and measurability (Adams, 2017; Ball et al., 2012; Bergh, 2015a; Bergh, 2015b). An important element here is what scope there is for teachers to raise issues outside the dominant discourse. This is particularly problematic if race and racism are excluded from policy and professional discourse, as this could lead to dominant structures and inequalities being reproduced rather than challenged (cf. Gillborn, 2007). On the other hand, the concept of professional accountability can also give direction and serve the purposes of anti-racist education (cf. Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016). These factors combined mean that teachers like Tove, Hannah, and Fatima need to be able to navigate educational policy in their anti-racist work. An important task for research, is, therefore, to pay further attention to if, and how, education policy can support teachers' anti-racist actions.

This brings us to the argument that neither individual teacher autonomy nor teacher collaboration per se necessarily lead to the qualities embedded in the concept of professional responsibility. On the contrary, this study demonstrates that conflicts occur both among colleagues and in relation to the statutory requirement on Swedish schools to counteract racist expression in education (SFS 2010:800). The narratives from the teachers, can serve as example of how qualities of professional accountability can provide direction and conditions for teachers. However, this is not primarily a question of strengthening external control and accountability, but rather an example of how legally formulated democratically desirable values can be emphasized and given support through active leadership at different levels.

Our study also contributes a detailed analysis of the individual teachers' stories that points to the potential for discussion with colleagues in the form of *collaboration* and exchange of experiences (De Jong et al., 2019). On the one hand, Fatima's, Tove's, Hannah's experiences cannot be seen in isolation from dominant structures that make collegial collaboration hard to achieve. On the other hand, our results illustrate how challenges in teachers' daily practices may be seen as opening the way for discussions about crucial issues among staff (Vangrieken et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2005). Altogether, the study points to a need for collaboration on teachers' professionalism in anti-racist work in different groups and contexts. One important consideration in the struggle for change is that no one is outside the racial system of power. Narratives like Fatima, Tove and Hannah can serve as a starting point for conversations on anti-racism education in the constant struggle for change.

## Note

1. See statistical data for upper secondary school (2021) at <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik>

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